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Interviews

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Arab American Life in the Trump Era: An Interview with Moustafa Bayoumi

Christine Marks and Moustafa Bayoumi

ABSTRACT In this interview, award-winning author Moustafa Bayoumi, Professor of English at Brooklyn College, CUNY and board member of *Lateral*, discusses Arab American life, social justice, and the rhetoric of the War on Terror in the Trump era and beyond. He also shares his views on identity politics as well as strategies of connection, resilience, and resistance in times of struggle.

Moustafa Bayoumi is an award-winning writer and Professor of English at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. He is the author of *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* (2008) and *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (2015). His work has received multiple awards, including the American Book Award and the Arab American Book Award for Nonfiction. As a columnist for *The Guardian*, he regularly publishes critiques of Donald Trump's anti-Muslim policies and the double standards that the government and the media apply to Muslim Americans. He has also contributed to *The New York Times Magazine*, *New York Magazine*, *The National*, *CNN.com*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Progressive*, and other publications (for links to his contributions, see his website: <http://moustafabayoumi.com/writings/>). A highly regarded author, Bayoumi is regularly invited to speak at national and international conferences and literary events. As we discuss below, he is also active on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/BayoumiMoustafa/>), where he posted the most shared tweet of the 2016 presidential debate (<https://twitter.com/BayoumiMoustafa/status/785293447141924865>). We met in Astoria this summer to talk about his views on Arab American life in the Dark Age of Trump.

CHRISTINE MARKS: Donald Trump has been in office for 178 days now. You've written about his first 100 days in *The Guardian*. Do you have any amendments to your observations after the events of the past 78 days?

MOUSTAFA BAYOUMI: What I wrote in *The Guardian* was that Trump has actually done something positive: he has unified a lot of people in opposition to him. He hasn't done much else, of course. His incompetence is monumental. But now I'm concerned that the resistance against Trump may have waxed and may now begin to wane. The rise and fall of activism against Trump is likely inevitable or, perhaps more accurately, cyclical. But when the Supreme Court recently ruled that a modified version of the Muslim ban could go forward, I became deeply worried about this country. What's more concerning to me than their troubling ruling is that their decision didn't seem to galvanize people. We had a lot of

unity at the 100-day mark but have much less organized opposition at the six-month mark. That reality is something to pay attention to.

CM: I appreciated the optimism you showed there as people took to the streets, but at this point one might indeed feel a bit disillusioned. So what can be done to keep the momentum and rediscover the energy and joy you observed after the first 100 days? Judith Butler has framed precarity as a site for shared alliance and political activism across difference. Do you still anticipate new alliances emerging in the Trump era?

MB: I'm certain that there will be new alliances in the future. The best kind of political coalitions happen organically due to some similarity of oppression and a shared vision of a better future. The coming catastrophe of climate change, to take one example, should unite many different constituencies, including the labor movement, antiwar activists, immigration advocates, and maybe even green techno utopians. I could imagine new and interesting alliances happening there. But one of the things I try not to do too much of in my work is to forecast into the future. There's enough of a crisis staring us in the face that we don't have to spend our time forecasting into the future. Instead, we need to deal with what's happening in the present and do so with sober analysis. What we should also be wary of is romanticizing our actions too much. Consider the Muslim ban, again. The resistance that developed immediately in the wake of the first proposed Muslim ban depended too much on a notion that the law will save the country from Trump's overreach. But the law has also been on the side of slavery, segregation, and Japanese internment, to name a few notorious examples. The law historically protects certain vested interests and maintains the social order. At times our laws may align with principles of social justice, but we have to be cognizant of the fact that very often our laws and the courts have gone against the principles of social justice. Regarding the Muslim ban, what happened is that people saw lawyers in a very heroic light because there were some lawyers who were doing extraordinary work to challenge the ban, and judges across the country also felt emboldened by the actions of these lawyers and of the people. But then when the Supreme Court spoke, all the energy of using the law to affirm principles of equality was sucked out of the fight. What this means is that we are going to have to have a very horizontal approach to understanding how we're going to achieve true social justice in the country. We can't simply rely on our traditional institutions, and in our struggles I suspect we may even find ourselves developing some new institutions.

CM: Let's look back some more then rather than looking forward. The publication dates of your two books (almost) frame Obama's presidency: *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?* came out in 2008, *This Muslim American Life* in 2015. What impact did the Obama administration have on Muslim Americans? What continuities and ruptures in the government's treatment of / rhetoric for Muslim Americans do you find most striking in the short time since Trump has become president?

MB: I started writing *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?* in the midst of the Bush administration, so I saw it very much as a project that was describing the Bush administration's impact on Arab and Muslim populations in the country. When the book came out—around the same time as the election was happening (the book came out in September and the election was in November)—I remember thinking, "Maybe the election of Obama will mean that the book is, I wouldn't say superfluous, but now about the past and not the present." Well, I was wrong, completely wrong. Part of the reason that the book continued to resonate was that Obama didn't have enough will or courage to change the orientation of the country when it came to the War on Terror. The changes that he did make were somewhat cosmetic. For example, his administration didn't like the name "Global War on Terror," and preferred to talk about "war on violent extremism" or the "war on al-Qaeda and its affiliates." But that didn't make any difference, really, as everyone still

employed the term “War on Terror.” Obama started off strong when he first came into the office, saying that he was going to end the practice of torture and that he was going to close Guantanamo Bay. But Guantanamo Bay, as we all know, is still open. To be fair, that was as much Congress’s fault as Obama’s, but still, looking at Obama’s record, we find basically a continuation in almost every aspect of the War on Terror, and in some ways an expansion of the war. We saw the escalation of drone warfare precisely because, as has been well documented, Obama did not want to bring more people to Guantanamo Bay. In terms of domestic policy, the Bush administration had a kind of blunt hammer approach to Muslim communities here. There were many sweep arrests. There was special registration, where non-citizen non-immigrant men from twenty-four Muslim-majority countries had to register with the government. With Obama, what we saw was that the approach became more targeted, but the target was still Muslim communities writ large. The FBI engaged informants and set up a lot of dubious acts of terror that they would then thwart at the last minute. They pursued the “Countering Violent Extremism” program, which stigmatized Muslim communities. What we saw with Obama was a shift in rhetoric but also essentially a deepening of the national security state. I suspect this trend will extend further with the presidency of Donald Trump.

CM: Do we see a shift in media representation and the production of knowledge? In *This Muslim American Life*, you wrote about the production of knowledge drawing on thinkers like Edward Said and Michel Foucault. Your words seem prophetic, as you observe “the birth of a pure and simple will to power, without the burden of knowledge, and where more knowledge just creates more complications.” So, are “fake news” and “alternative facts” again simply a continuation of this trend, or have we entered a new stage of (lack of) knowledge production?

MB: That’s a good question that I’d probably want to think more deeply about, but my initial response is that I think today’s reality is less a break with and more probably a continuation of the past. People seem to have forgotten how much George W. Bush was ridiculed for not being particularly smart or literate. Perhaps Obama’s mastery of language helped people forget Bush. And Obama’s talents also make Trump look particularly idiotic. But Trump and Bush share a certain kind of uncurious approach to the world, one where knowledge just gets in the way and expertise? Well, expertise be damned. Only power matters. We saw that with Bush, and the essay where I examine that in *This Muslim American Life* is called “A Bloody Stupid War.” Much of what I wrote there, composed before Trump arrived on the national political scene, would fit Trump, too. He continues Bush’s notion that pure power overrides any other consideration. Bush, however, sometimes seemed embarrassed by his genuine ignorance of things. He seemed to want to channel his lack of knowledge into folksy simplicity. Trump on the other hand sees his ignorance as a virtue. God help us. But, of course, our analysis should not be about Bush and Trump as people but about how their administrations operate, and both administrations are concerned with the production of power over and above the production of knowledge. “Fake News” is Trump’s way of usurping the production of knowledge for his projection of power.

CM: Can we talk a bit more about your personal background as it in some ways reflects the precarity of Muslim American lives? You received your green card right after 9/11 and you’ve stated that to some degree that made you feel safer because it was better than a work visa, but of course you were still quite vulnerable in spite of that status. Now you’ve had your American citizenship for about six years. Amit Majmudar writes in “The Beard,” a poem recently published in *The New Yorker*, “I am alone here now, / among Americans a foreigner / when just last year I used to be / among Americans American.” How do you feel? A foreigner? American? Both?

MB: That's a tough question because I think that I try to reject any strong identification with anywhere, but I understand that that is a privileged position. My parents are from Egypt. I was born in Switzerland. I've spent significant amounts of time in my life in Europe. I was raised in Canada, and I've lived now for quite a while in the United States. I'm not part of the jet-setting elite by any stretch. My roots in Egypt are quite humble. Nevertheless, I was afforded a certain amount of migration possibilities, cosmopolitanism—whatever you want to call it—which affords me a certain luxury. What this means is that whenever somebody wants to identify me as something, I sometimes try to deflect that desire onto another identity of my choosing. It's my little way of trying to stop people from prejudging me.

CM: Yes, there's a freedom in having multiple belongings, evading being labeled. Which brings us to identity politics . . . In a PEN interview you claim that "Identity has become a predictive science that defeats the spontaneity of human existence," and in your recent introduction to *Mizna*, a journal on Arab American art and literature, you also reject the idea that being Arab American is primarily about identity or politics. Instead, you suggest, "it's about physics. Arab Americans are endless combinations of matter and energy. We are the profound study of movement through space and time. We are the result of the sometimes-forced propulsion of particles and objects—also known as people—from one land to another." Could you elaborate on the limitations of identity politics and your alternative view on being Arab American in the Age of Trump?

MB: The way that we talk about "identity politics" is troubling in the United States. The term tends to be thrown around as an accusation by conservatives (and some liberals), and it's used as a way of shutting out people who have been historically marginalized and who are pushing back on the systems that have marginalized them. When "identity politics" is invoked by its detractors, it's usually talked about as a post-civil rights and very recent phenomenon that is hastening the demise of the nation and its putative unity. That's nonsense, of course. Identity politics began at least when European colonialism circumnavigated the globe. European colonialism labeled people into very strict and unchangeable identities as a way of colonizing them. Identity politics, in other words, has been with us for hundreds of years. It's just that when it's not in service of empire, or the nation state, or the dominant group, then it becomes an insult instead of the mode by which power is wielded. What's at the heart of identity politics, in other words, is not identity but power. If we stop at identity and don't consider power (which is often how liberal multiculturalism operates), then we fall into a trap where identity becomes a straightjacket. You represent one thing and one thing only. But no one has one identity only. That's what I was trying to get at in the *Mizna* introduction, that Arab Americans (and all people) are complex and multifaceted. Identity politics can either be a straightjacket, locking people into a fixed identity, or identity politics can be a way to understand how identity and power operate with the aim of producing a more equitable world. The age of Trump will favor the former. It's up to us to push the latter.

CM: Reflecting on the response to your *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*, you picture yourself as a fish in fishbowl—inescapably subjected to the public's distorted perception of you. We know from thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon how detrimental such distortion can be to one's sense of self. Du Bois saw the history of African Americans as a history of strife towards a merging of the double consciousness—"always looking at one's self through the eyes of others"—into a unified self. Would you say that that is the primary struggle of Arab Americans as well?

MB: Arab Americans and really all marginalized people share this reality of double consciousness, where we see ourselves in one way but also know that we are seen by the dominant culture in another way. But double consciousness leads less to a search for a

unified self and more to an understanding that in this dialectic, between who you are and how you are seen, lies prejudice.

CM: To come back to the fishbowl metaphor one more time: As a public intellectual, your fishbowl is kind of a major attraction in an aquarium full of visitors. Since you can't actually hide behind a coral, where do you find refuge?

MB: It's very important to have a community of people who can understand you and your struggles wordlessly. You don't have to explain things. They just know exactly what it is. That's very comforting. A zone of non-judgment. That's probably true for anybody, but that's certainly true for life in the public intellectual realm. You also quickly develop a thick skin. Hate mail, things like that, who cares? Especially in the internet age, it's so easy to send insults, but I ignore them. (I know I'm lucky here. The hate that's directed toward women in the public sphere is much worse.) I also seek some refuge in aesthetics. I still look for things that are even traditionally beautiful. They make me happy, and that makes life more liveable. For example, I've recently started to learn how to play Flamenco guitar, and while the sounds that I make are certainly not beautiful, listening to more and more of that kind of music, which I find tremendously moving, is. As is the cinema of Michael Haneke, for example. I find his films amazing. In all kinds of ways, the arts can be a regenerative place. We should never forget that.

CM: It's interesting that the three examples you mention are all beyond language: wordless understanding, music, and images.

MB: You're right. What does that say?

CM: Language is troubling . . . Yet the work that you do requires you to speak multiple languages in a sense: academic, journalistic, twitter speak. You go through different avenues to reach people. Who are you writing to? Who do you consider to be your main audience?

MB: What has always interested me from the very beginning of writing, even back in high school, is, how do you write in different modes, in different registers? I was very fortunate that I had very good English teachers in high school. We didn't just read plays and novels, but we also read essays and explored the art of the essay. We looked at literature with complexity and not just with exams in mind. And as an undergraduate, I wrote for the student newspaper. I mostly wrote film reviews because I got to see the movies for free. But I also did some reporting, and I remember trying to find a different voice for each type of piece. I was also the poetry editor of our undergraduate literary journal. I've had some fiction published. I've written journalism, scholarship, and tweets. Twitter is a good example because when I first tried my hand at it, I was trying to figure out what it is. I thought that Twitter, with its 140-character limit, was a natural place for aphorisms and poetry. And I still see some people on Twitter who think that. But that's not what Twitter is about. I realized quickly that Twitter is this ongoing conversation. A tweet is more like an interjection than a maxim. Once I understood that Twitter is a conversation, the nature of my tweets changed as well. To write well is about understanding the genre of what you're writing in and then finding the right voice for that genre. That's one of the things I look for when I write.

CM: To come back to the beginning: 178 days down, many more to come. . . . Has this election shifted your focus as a writer?

MB: Political engagement is more of an imperative today than it was last year. Once Trump was elected, I postponed a couple of writing projects I had in mind because there now is this grand imperative that's staring us right in the face, especially for Muslim Americans. The security of Muslim Americans is currently in jeopardy. It would be

irresponsible for me not to address that. But there is some hope, too. I've been working on these issues at least since 2001, but now there's much more acknowledgment that Muslim Americans routinely face bigotry and state repression. In other words, people across the country are waking up to the reality that Muslim Americans have been living through since 2001. We need to build on this understanding in order to forestall any kind of tragedy that could come.

CM: Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with *Lateral*, and good luck and energy for the next 1275 days!

 [Bio](#)



Christine Marks

Christine Marks is Associate Professor of English at LaGuardia Community College, CUNY. She received her PhD from the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. Her academic interests include contemporary American literature, relationality, literature and medicine, and food studies. Her monograph *"I am because you are": Relationality in the Works of Siri Hustvedt* was published by Winter (Heidelberg University Press) in March 2014. She co-edited the volume *Zones of Focused Ambiguity in Siri Hustvedt's Works: Interdisciplinary Essays* (De Gruyter 2016).

 [Bio](#)



Moustafa Bayoumi

Moustafa Bayoumi is the author of the critically acclaimed *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America* (Penguin), which won an American Book Award and the Arab American Book Award for Nonfiction. His latest book, *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (NYU Press) also won the Arab American Book Award for Nonfiction. A columnist for *The Guardian* and frequent contributor to *The Nation* and other publications, Bayoumi also co-edited *The Edward Said Reader* and edited *Midnight on the Mavi Marmara* (O/R Books). He is Professor of English at Brooklyn College, CUNY.



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